



# The Office of the Federal President and its handling of the National Socialist past between 1949 and 1994

Findings from a research project



Der Bundespräsident

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## **Foreword by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier**

We Germans continually encounter our country's National Socialist past – including me as the Federal President, even within my own four walls. The Federal President's official villa in Berlin's Dahlem district, where I took up residence following my election in 2017, once belonged to Hugo Heymann, a Jewish businessman who died in 1938 after being abused by the Gestapo. He had previously tried in vain to flee Germany. His fate was ignored for far too long. We cannot undo the National Socialist past, but it is our moral obligation not to shy away from it.

The history of the official villa was brought to light in 2018. And it was important to me that the Federal President, in that position, should also address this history. That is why, in late 2019, I issued a public call for tenders for the research project on “The Office of the Federal President and its handling of the National Socialist past”. Following a two-stage selection procedure and with the support of an academic advisory council, we were able to gain Professor Norbert Frei from the University of Jena, an expert in Germany's handling of Nazi history, for the project.

In the past years, many ministries and authorities have commissioned investigations into the way they dealt with the subject of National Socialism in the early days of the Federal Republic. It was clear that the office of the head of state can certainly not neglect that.

When Theodor Heuss was elected as the first President of the Federal Republic of Germany on 12 September 1949, little more than four years had passed since the National Socialist reign of terror, the Second World War and the Shoah, that betrayal of all civilised values. What role did that very recent past play in the country's democratic rebirth? How did Federal President Heuss and his successors view the National Socialist period? What did the Federal Presidents

say about the deeds and the perpetrators, how did they commemorate the victims of German crimes, in speeches or during state visits, for example? How did they deal with the Nazi past of candidates for appointments or decorations?

Here, light must also be shed on the institution which has prepared and supported the work of the Federal Presidents since 1949: the Office of the Federal President. The biographies of the Federal Presidents are publicly accessible, but who were the staff at the Office of the Federal President? How did they experience the 12 years of Nazi rule? How did their background shape their work at the Office of the Federal President?

The findings from Professor Frei's research now provide answers to these questions. He and his team conducted their research with academic independence. The Office of the Federal President gave them access to all relevant files and documents.

I thank them for their contribution to reckoning with a past that still shapes our present. Confronting this past is part of our responsibility that will never end.

Norbert Frei

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The historical research project on “The Office of the Federal President and its handling of the National Socialist past”, which began in summer 2020, was launched at the initiative of Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

The period of investigation, from 1949 to 1994, spans the terms of office of all six presidents of the “old” Federal Republic: Theodor Heuss, Heinrich Lübke, Gustav Heinemann, Walter Scheel, Karl Carstens and Richard von Weizsäcker. Differences in their personal style notwithstanding, all these men had a significant impact on the development of the state's political direction and of its forms of confrontation with the past.

At the same time, what these Federal Presidents said or did with respect to the time of the Third Reich was also coloured by the experiences of their own contemporaneity. For, unlike subsequent heads of the Federal Republic of Germany, they had lived through the years of the Second World War, at least, as adults. Initially, that was also true of the small number of staff of the Office of the Federal President, where the personnel also formed part of the investigation.

The research findings summarised here are presented in more detail in Norbert Frei's book: **Im Namen der Deutschen. Die Bundespräsidenten und die NS-Vergangenheit 1949–1994** (In the name of the German people. The Federal Presidents and the National Socialist past, 1949–1994), C. H. Beck publishing house, Munich 2023.

## What does National Socialist involvement mean?

“The Office of the Federal President has limited scope to act. We have only a small staff, but all problems converge on us.” These are the words that Theodor Heuss used to describe to friends and acquaintances the situation at Viktorshöhe, Bad Godesberg, his provisional first official seat, following his election on 12 September 1949.

Unlike in most federal ministries, there was little institutional continuity at the Office of the Federal President. Heuss himself had lived through the Third Reich as a journalist and writer at a distance from the NSDAP following the loss of his Reichstag mandate as a member of the liberal German State Party in summer 1933, a development which even his parliamentary group’s support for the Enabling Act did not prevent. In the surviving personnel files of his staff there are only three people, all former Nazi party comrades, who had already worked at the Office of the President, which under Hitler had become practically redundant. The issues of continuity in the Office of the Federal President therefore centre on the ties which the first Head of the Office, Manfred Klaiber, as a member of the diplomatic service that was dissolved in 1945, reforged even before the Federal Republic was founded.

Although the proportion of those at Villa Hammerschmidt, the seat of the Federal President from late 1950, who were politically incriminated was, viewed as a whole, lower than in most federal ministries, former NSDAP members were particularly prevalent in the higher echelons. In addition to Klaiber and his successor Karl Theodor Bleek (from summer 1957), during Heuss’ first term of office four out of a total of ten, and in the second term six out of eleven Heads of Division ranked among the millions of former Nazis who by this time were largely viewed with leniency. The approach to the political handling of the past at the Office of the Federal President was therefore no different from that adopted wherever the Federal Republic was being built: In the Office’s day-to-day affairs, a “communicative silence” (Hermann Lübke)

on the subject of former Nazi party membership generally prevailed, only being articulated under pressure from outside and hardly counting as a flaw, especially if it could be trivialised as having been merely “nominal”.

Admittedly, it is also true that pure statistics regarding the proportion of former NSDAP members within a government authority are only of limited relevance. More important is the question of whether and how this individual involvement affected the exercise of their official duties.

At the Office of the Federal President, this was particularly relevant in connection with the issue of Allied postwar justice, specifically the widespread demand in the early Federal Republic for the release of Germans convicted for war crimes who were still in Allied detention. Formally, the problem of convicted war criminals (“Kriegsverurteilte”) did not fall within the remit of the Federal President, whose power of pardon anchored in the Basic Law did not apply in these cases. In fact, however, the Presidents’ engagement for prisoners in Allied detention continued beyond the term of office of Heuss, who intervened in numerous cases – for example, that of Ernst von Weizsäcker, who had been convicted in the Nuremberg Ministries Trial.

Under the constant barrage of the war criminals lobby, Presidents interceded time and again right up to Richard von Weizsäcker, even though by the end only Hitler’s former deputy Rudolf Heß was left, held in the prison for war criminals in Spandau. And traces of right-wing resentment run through the correspondence and memos from individual members of staff at Villa Hammerschmidt over the decades: resentment towards the Allied victors’ justice as well as in connection with the process of denazification, for example with regard to individual decisions about awarding the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany.

## Precedent-setting remembrance

### Theodor Heuss (1949–1959)

Theodor Heuss undoubtedly realised that the publicly spoken word would become the Federal President's most important vehicle even during the consultations on the Basic Law. Once in office, the weight he attached to the preparation of his speeches reflected this – and he rarely took advantage of assistance, unlike his successors, who would do so as a matter of course.

The first Federal President made his earliest and undoubtedly most influential appearance in terms of the political handling of the past on 7 December 1949 at the Kurhaus in Wiesbaden. "Courage to love" was the title of the address he gave to the German Coordinating Council of the Societies for Christian-Jewish Cooperation, which was in the process of being established. Heuss' call for empathy with those who had been persecuted, with the survivors and the minority who had hoped and fought for the end of the National Socialist regime could hardly have been clearer: "We must not forget things which people would like to forget because that is so easy. We must not forget the Nuremberg laws, the yellow star of David, the burning of the synagogues, the deportation of the Jewish people to foreign countries, to misfortune and death."

Heuss gave another precedent-setting speech on 30 November 1952 at the inauguration of the memorial on the grounds of the former Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. In the presence of Nahum Goldmann, who, in his role as President of the World Jewish Congress, had signed the so-called Reparations Agreement a few weeks earlier, the Federal President, referring to the persecution of the Jews, stated: "We *knew* of these things." That led to his second key message, where Heuss rejected the idea of collective guilt, but considered collective shame to be necessary – in the face of a guilt which ultimately remained abstract: "No one, no one will take this shame from us."

The speeches by Heuss and Goldmann in Bergen-Belsen constituted early steps along the still untrodden path towards public confrontation with the



Federal President Theodor Heuss and Elly Heuss-Knapp at the Kurhaus in Wiesbaden on 7 December 1949

events which only decades later would acquire the name Holocaust and be described as "the betrayal of all civilised values".

Shortly after his re-election, Heuss spoke at the Freie Universität Berlin in the evening of 19 July 1954, where he defended the right of resistance of the assassination group led by Stauffenberg against nationalist criticism of them as "oath-breakers". The Federal Agency for Civic Education distributed 3.2 million copies of Heuss' speech, thereby ensuring that his ethical appraisal of 20 July 1944 found its way into schools and acquired a firm place in the canon of commemoration of the resistance to Hitler.

A large amount of correspondence bore witness to the fact that Heuss' words had not gone unheeded: from admirers and critics alike – and not least from German emigrants. Over the course of later presidencies, letters from the general public have remained a good guide to gauging the reception of initiatives undertaken by Federal Presidents in the area of remembrance policy.

## Continuity and crisis

### Heinrich Lübke (1959–1969)

The discretion with which political careers in the Third Reich were treated in public during the 1950s and 1960s extended not only to those who attempted to cover up their membership of the NSDAP, however long or short. Silence was also maintained over non-membership. The fact that the Centre Party member Heinrich Lübke, who was taken into pre-trial detention for 20 months in 1934, did not agree to join the NSDAP even in later years, was not mentioned – not least because it would have reflected badly on those who ultimately did give in to such a demand, opportunistic considerations or their own lethargy. For a Federal President from the ranks of the Union parties who trusted in the validity of such unwritten rules of discourse, this would present difficulties: against the backdrop of a clash between the systems of the two Germanies where the GDR was skilled in exploiting the issue of the “non-addressal of the past”, ostensibly only a Western problem, and managing this with increasing perfection from the late 1950s.

When it came to interpreting the “recent past”, the differences between Heuss and Lübke were not nearly as significant as the soon worsening image of the second Federal President would suggest. Heuss’ rhetoric came across as more competent than that of his successor, who was either glued to his manuscripts or meandered dangerously when speaking without notes. Yet the message of both was similar when it came to the political handling of the past. Its tone in a nutshell: no collective guilt, but a common responsibility shared by all Germans; no line to be drawn under the period, but expectations of reconciliation towards Jews in return for the “reparations”; Hitler and his henchmen were a small minority, the vast majority of Germans were their victims.

Lübke continued to follow Heuss’ course with regard to the political handling of the past in his second term of office. Yet 20 years after the end of the War, the younger generations’ view of the National Socialist period was more critical, their perspective on the GDR more relaxed and their willingness



Federal President Heinrich Lübke visiting the memorial to the victims of resistance against Hitler at the Berlin-Plötzensee memorial site on 19 July 1964

to show leniency towards compromised older people had diminished. As a consequence of a campaign launched by East Berlin targeting the “concentration camp builder” – as an engineer employed by an architectural company, Lübke had, among other things, overseen the construction of barracks on the grounds of the army test centre in Peenemünde which housed forced labourers and concentration camp inmates – the second Federal President resigned in spring 1969, ten weeks before the end of his term of office. Lübke’s activity in the arms sector of the Third Reich did not make him a central player in Germany’s war industry, but in this role he, unlike Heuss, was a member of the functional elite during the National Socialist period.

## The Federal Presidents from 1949 to 1994

**1949–1959**  
**Theodor Heuss**

31.1.1884–12.12.1963



**1974–1979**  
**Walter Scheel**

8.7.1919–24.8.2016



**1959–1969**  
**Heinrich Lübke**

14.10.1894–6.4.1972



**1979–1984**  
**Karl Carstens**

14.12.1914–30.5.1992



**1969–1974**  
**Gustav Heinemann**

23.7.1899–7.7.1976



**1984–1994**  
**Richard von Weizsäcker**

15.4.1920–31.1.2015





## Shift of power?

### Gustav Heinemann (1969–1974)

Much has been written about Gustav Heinemann as a man of the church and a political figure, with great empathy, yet for a long time little in-depth research into his character was undertaken, and certainly not in connection with his professional activity during the Third Reich. The biography by Thomas Flemming published in 2014 was the first to provide some insight into Heinemann's career with Rheinstahl AG and his rise to deputy board member in summer 1936. According to the biography, the company lawyer and mine director turned down a lucrative post with the Rhenish-Westphalian Coal Syndicate because of his work in the Confessing Church. At the same time, there is no doubt that – like his predecessor Lübke – he worked within the system of the German arms industry, was made “indispensable” and was aware of the use of forced labourers.

As Head of State, Heinemann admitted this involvement, albeit in general terms, in his speech to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 20 July 1944. No Federal President before that had spoken so self-critically: “I am plagued by the question of why I did not offer more resistance during the Third Reich.”

Heinemann's election in March 1969 was seen as the harbinger of a “shift of power” in federal politics, a message he himself cultivated. The “citizens' President”, who was also popular with the critical younger generation, was never confronted with his professional activity during the Third Reich, unlike his predecessor Lübke. On the whole, Heinemann showed strikingly little interest in discussing the National Socialist past. “It is no longer necessary to go into the history of the origin of the Second World War. It is obvious”, he declared on 1 September 1969 on the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Germany's invasion of Poland. At the same time, the first social-democratic Federal President was well aware that the Federal Republic was surrounded by neighbouring countries in which Germany's occupation was far from forgotten, even a quarter of a century after the end of the war. He regarded



Former Federal President Gustav Heinemann, donor Kurt Körber and Federal President Walter Scheel with the prizewinners of the 1975 school competition

his state visits to Western Europe and Scandinavia as “reconciliation visits” – beginning with his trip to the Netherlands in November 1969, where, at the Hollandsche Schouwburg memorial site in Amsterdam, he paid tribute to the Jews who had been deported from there.

Heinemann's main focus was on the freedom movements in Germany's history of democracy. That explains his engagement for the memorial site in Rastatt and the German history competition for schools “for the Federal President's Prize” established under his patronage, which in its first year, in 1973, centred on the subject of the 1848/49 German Revolution. It was only during Karl Carstens' term of office that the National Socialist period featured as a subject in the competition – which is still running today – despite initial resistance from the Office of the Federal President. Two competition years focused on everyday life during the Nazi period and generated a particularly large response.

## The Germans and “Holocaust”

### Walter Scheel (1974–1979)

With Walter Scheel, a will to represent that had been unknown until this point moved into Villa Hammerschmidt in summer 1974. It is hard to say how much this had to do with the character of the Federal President, who, at age 55, would long be the youngest person to occupy this position, and how much with processing the experiences of a generation that had been particularly badly affected by the War. Yet the fact that his presidential speeches often seemed more like observations from an outsider than those of a young contemporary of the Nazi period, which, as a former Hitler youth leader and, from 1941, a Nazi party member, he was, no doubt has something to do with the autobiographical reticence of the former first lieutenant in the German air force.

Scheel's membership of the NSDAP only became known near the end of his term of office, directly after the events commemorating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Night of the Pogrom on 8 November 1978, when he gave a television broadcast. The background to this indiscretion was the proposal in spring 1979 by the Union parties of Karl Carstens, whose NSDAP membership had just been disclosed, as a potential candidate for the presidential election.

Well aware that there was no prospect of a second term of office for him, Scheel remained demonstratively calm in this situation. Speaking to a young social democrat who feared “another German division between those who experienced the Third Reich first hand (What did they do?) and those who were fortunate enough not to have to experienced it (They don't believe us!)”, Scheel calculated: “In 1933 I was 13, at the start of the War I was 20 years old.” That in itself was presumably supposed to imply that there was nothing to confess about his past. He said it was well known that he became a member of the NSDAP on the basis of a letter that he received in Russia at the front. With the best will in the world he could no longer explain how the communication came to be sent to him. He conceded that it might be difficult for someone who knew more about living in a democracy than during the National Socialist



Federal President Walter Scheel on 9 November 1978 in Cologne Synagogue at a ceremony on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Night of the Pogrom

period to understand. But it did not change the fact that it was so. He said that he could, of course, now attempt to describe the circumstances that shaped the lives of young people at that time. But that, the President went on to say, was something he would rather leave to the historians.

A few weeks earlier, in January 1979, the broadcasting of the television series “Holocaust” unsettled the German people. Scheel did not comment on it. Four years prior to that, however, he had set a future-oriented new tone in his speech marking the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the war, when he introduced the term “liberation”: “We were liberated from the terrible yoke of war, murder, slavery and barbarism. And we breathed a sigh of relief when the end finally came. But we do not forget that this liberation came from outside, that we, the Germans, were not capable of shaking off this yoke ourselves [...]”

## Forgotten victims

### Karl Carstens (1979–1984)

Karl Carstens' election was preceded by a vehement debate on his NSDAP past. It would be an exaggeration to say that his entire time in office was overshadowed by this unfortunate start. However, it is also true that this shadow never entirely disappeared. The critical younger generation and the intellectuals remained distant.

In his first speech as the fifth Federal President on 1 July 1979, Carstens signalled that for him the intensified debate across society about the National Socialist past since the screening of "Holocaust" all in all went too far. Theodor Heuss had "made statements that continue to be influential today about the horrors of the extermination camps, the relationship of Germans and Jews", statements which, seemingly for Carstens, required no further deepening or repetition. "In my view, the schools should be giving more attention to German civilisation – specifically, German history. The schools ought to be depicting the ups and downs of this history, with the goal of showing how, for 30 years now, German history has been beginning to merge with European history as a whole."

Karl Carstens did not find the inner freedom to speak openly about the Third Reich and the crimes committed in this period. He managed even less than his predecessors to explain himself in his contemporaneity. The phrases and verbal constructions that he had coined in response to the criticism of his background in the weeks and months leading up to his election were ones he continued to use during his time in office. On almost everything connected to National Socialism, this language was almost entirely devoid of philosophical and rhetorical ambition.

As a result, even more meaning attached to the step he was prepared to take in reaching out to a minority heavily persecuted during the Third Reich and which suffered continued discrimination in the Federal Republic, a minority which



On 3 November 1981, Karl Carstens was the first Federal President to receive a delegation of German Sinti led by Romani Rose.

had been fighting with increasing vigour for social and political recognition since the late 1970s: in September 1980, Romani Rose approached the Federal President on behalf of the Association of German Sinti because its members were of the opinion that he, as the highest representative of the state, could help ensure that the Sinti were, after 35 years, finally recognised as German citizens with equal rights while acknowledging their cultural autonomy, thus enabling them to live in the state they have been calling home for generations.

On 3 November 1981, Carstens received a delegation led by Rose for what proved to be a very informative exchange. Just as the Federal President had readily assumed the role of the one asking the questions, he was clear in saying at the end that the conversation had not just been interesting but also deeply moving. It showed that society was beginning to focus its attention more on hitherto forgotten groups of National Socialist victims.

## The speech

### Richard von Weizsäcker (1984–1994)

The ambivalence with which Richard von Weizsäcker on the one hand claimed the authority of a witness of the time and on the other hand remained largely silent about his personal experiences in his speech on 8 May 1985 meant he followed on from both Carstens and Scheel, who had also worn the Wehrmacht uniform, and indeed from his earlier predecessors. What gave Weizsäcker's speech authority was the presence with which he spoke. When he noted that "every German was able to witness what his Jewish compatriots had to suffer, ranging from plain apathy and hidden intolerance to outright hatred", when he asked who could "remain unsuspecting" after the "burning of the synagogues", he did so with the power and eloquence of the Head of State who was giving testimony on behalf of the German people. "Whoever opened his eyes and ears and sought information could not fail to notice that Jews were being deported. The nature and scope of the destruction may have exceeded human imagination, but in reality there was, apart from the crime itself, the attempt by too many people including those of my generation, who were young and were not involved in planning the events and carrying them out, not to take note of what was happening."

"The speech" (as it was soon referred to not just on the spine of a lever-arch folder in the Office of the Federal President) was without a doubt very much anchored in its time and thus, read sentence for sentence, almost took on the guise of a multi-layered optical illusion on the political handling of the past. Historiographic anachronisms flank realisations voiced more clearly in public for the first time, for example regarding the plight of the forced labourers or the homosexuals killed, the Sinti and Roma, the "mentally ill who were killed, as well as the people who had to die for their religious or political beliefs."

No other political speech held in Germany since – not even in the defining years 1989/90 – has met with an even comparable degree of resonance and international recognition. By the end of von Weizsäcker's time in office in



Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker during his speech commemorating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the War on 8 May 1985 in the German Bundestag

1994, two million copies of the speech had been distributed. And even almost four decades on, it is irrefutable that the speech by the sixth Federal President is one of a number of milestones in terms of our remembrance that began with the "Holocaust" series in 1979 and was to lay the foundation of the culture of remembrance which shapes the united Germany to this very day.

The major room for manoeuvre in issues regarding how to deal with the past that von Weizsäcker carved out for himself with the speech was rewarded with an important accolade that same year. After a number of state visits following in the footsteps of his predecessors, he, almost two decades after the establishment of diplomatic relations, was the first Head of State of the Federal Republic to be invited for a state visit to Israel in October 1985.



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Cover photo: Office of the Federal President staff standing around the Federal President's official vehicle in front of Villa Hammerschmidt in Bonn on 4 July 1973

